

The Big Humanitarian Rethink

Lydia Poole

17th June 2025

This consultation was initiated in response to the closed-door IASC-led “humanitarian reset” process. This moment is too important to repeat the mistakes of earlier rounds of humanitarian reform. And a system that does not make use of its collective intelligence, and does not listen to diverse views, will not be resilient to future shocks.

Inspired by digital civic consultations around the world, this consultation is intended to provide a platform for people who have a stake in the international humanitarian system, primarily its workers, to communicate their views on what they believe is important in our collective responses to the shocks the international humanitarian system faces in 2025.

The consultation is run on the pol.is platform. Pol.is is a tried and tested real-time survey system that “helps identify the different ways a large group of people think about a divisive or complicated topic.”

Up to 5th May 2025, 331 people have taken part, 379 statements have been submitted, and 17,446 votes cast. Charts include statements that received more than 50 votes. Other relevant statements are listed in footnotes. The full dataset may be downloaded here: <https://pol.is/report/r4abppppbcbpkaahabejx>

A word of caution in interpreting the findings. This is not a regular survey. Participants do not submit demographic information, we don’t know who took part. People are not required to vote on everything, so each comment has a variable number of responses. Readers should not expect a clean and comparable dataset as you might with a structured survey.

The advantages of the pol.is tool however are substantial. It is completely transparent and unlike structured surveys, which are heavily biased in their design, participants have total freedom to raise whatever they want, in whatever terms they want. It is completely anonymous, and everyone’s voice is equal. Participants can vote on other people’s ideas and add their own. Over time, pol.is automatically groups participants into voting blocs. who vote similarly to help identify shared areas of agreement and divergence.

1. Humanitarians are divided. Working with diverse views, rather than excluding or avoiding them, will be critical in navigating the challenges ahead.

Reforms in the past have faced resistance and ultimately delivered limited impact. Any new system must accommodate divergences in the values, priorities and concerns among actors within the system. Otherwise it will not be effective, nor will it be resilient.

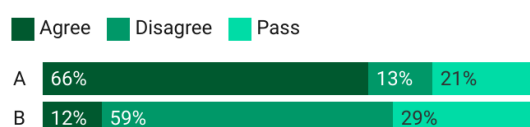
Participants in the consultation coalesced into two voting blocs. Of the 322 participants, the system assigned 271 into two groups who voted in similar ways. The larger group A (176 of 271),

we might call the “re-imaginers” and group B (95 of 271 respondents), the “improvers”.¹

Among humanitarians, responding to consultation, the As, the humanitarian re-imaginers, are more likely to support radical disruption of the current Northern dominated concentrations of power. They are more likely to endorse language about solidarity and to question the validity of traditional humanitarian principles, in particular the principle of neutrality. They identify local and national actors as the force that should drive change and lament what they see as a loss of the volunteer spirit.

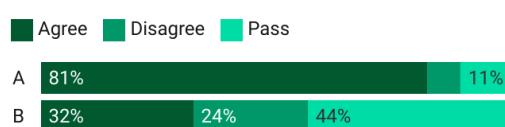
The Bs, the humanitarian improvers, are more likely to resist challenges to established humanitarian principles. They hesitate to endorse fundamental dismantling of current mechanisms of power and resources.

“People/Institutions from the Global North should get out of the way of local organisations, their role should be fundraising and support”



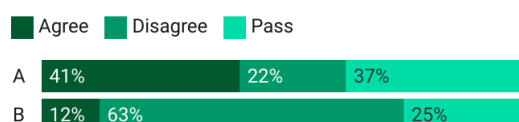
Created with Datawrapper

“Excessive monetisation of international aid has turned it into an industry, and volunteerism has almost disappeared.”



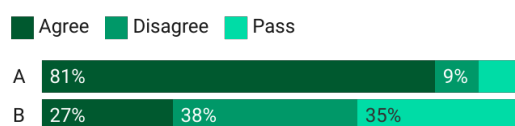
Created with Datawrapper

“Humanitarian principles need to be refined as they don’t fit the reality nor the purpose”



Created with Datawrapper

“The humanitarian sector still too closely identifies with savorism”



Created with Datawrapper

2. There is also, much that we agree on. These areas of consensus provide a solid foundation for change.

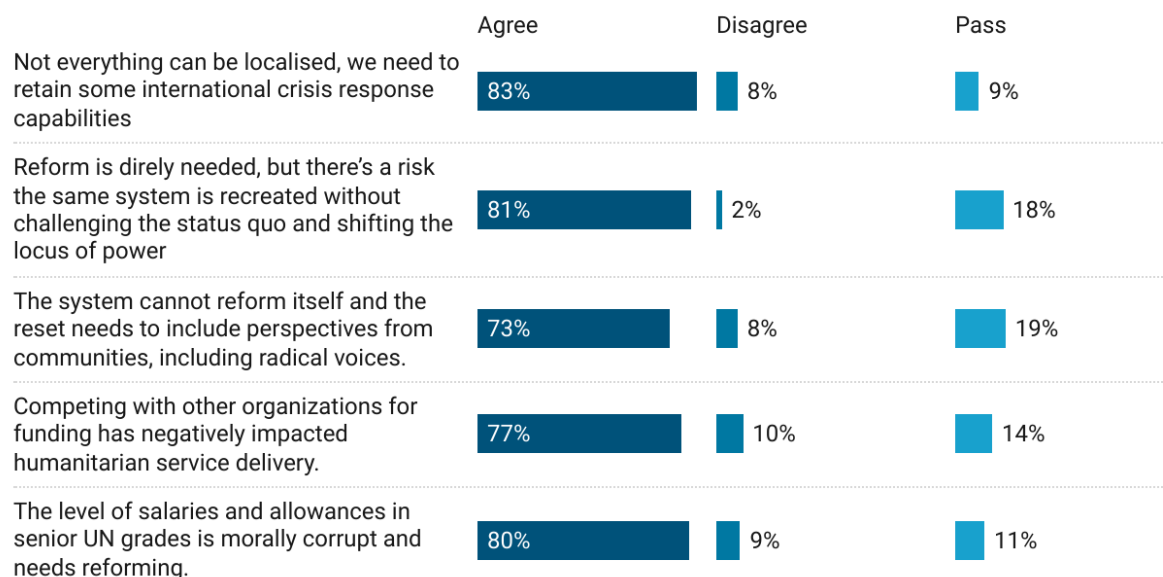
While there is much that divides us, on the big themes and issues, there are often high levels of agreement. Understanding these areas of agreement is an important foundation for change, including navigating tension and disagreement in other areas.

Many are strong advocates of localisation, yet participants agreed that there is in fact still a need to retain international crisis response capabilities. This statement above all others provides much needed common ground.

Many also agreed that this is a moment of opportunity and risk. The system had accumulated serious problems. It has become too top heavy, too slow and bureaucratic.

¹ These terms are borrowed from recent research published by Sara Kinsbergen and Zunera Rana who identified two dominant perspectives in aid reform debates. In their framing, the “improvers” aim to fix the system from within - looking for ways to fill funding gaps, improve efficiency and local ownership. The re-imaginers advocate for a radical overhaul - questioning donor and incumbents’ control, pushing for sovereignty, and proposing alternative development models.

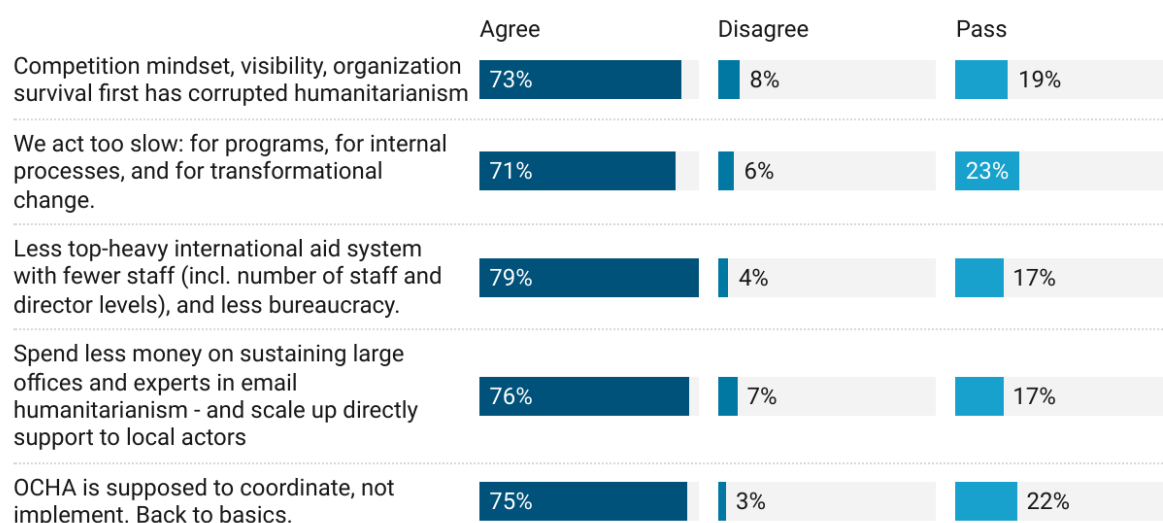
There are real concerns that we will not realise this moment of opportunity. That we lack a clear vision, and the way forward is not yet clear. Most of all, people are concerned that as with earlier rounds of reforms, the unequal distribution of power will remain intact.



Created with Datawrapper

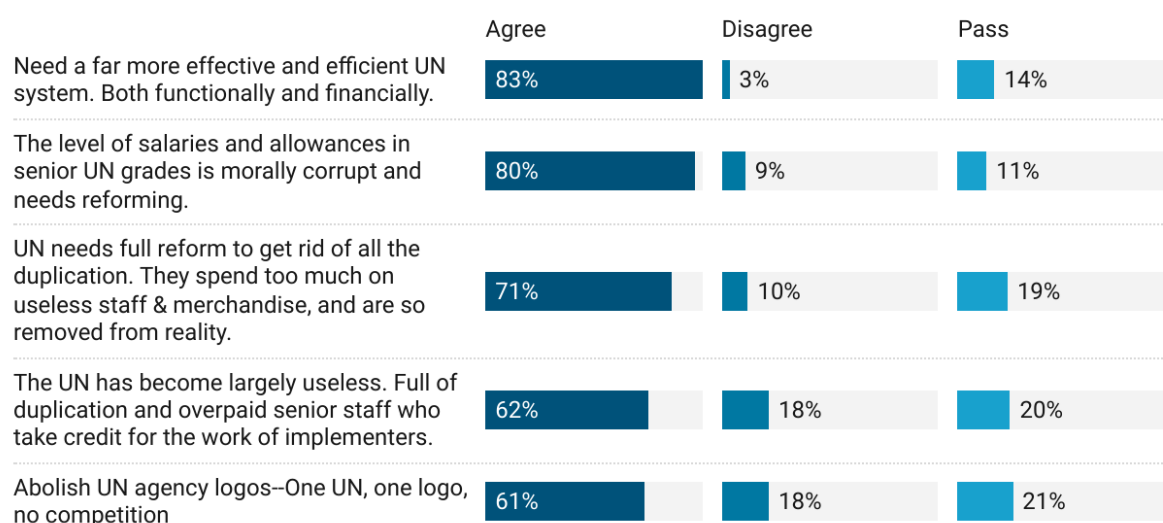
3. The system has become too bureaucratic and bloated and lost its way.

Many agree that the international humanitarian system has become too top heavy and lost its focus on delivery, with too many layers, processes, standards and tools. Competition for funding and visibility is a negative driving force.



Created with Datawrapper

The UN came in for heavy criticism, with many supporting statements highlighting competition, duplication, distance from operational implementation, and criticising UN salaries in the strongest terms.



Created with Datawrapper

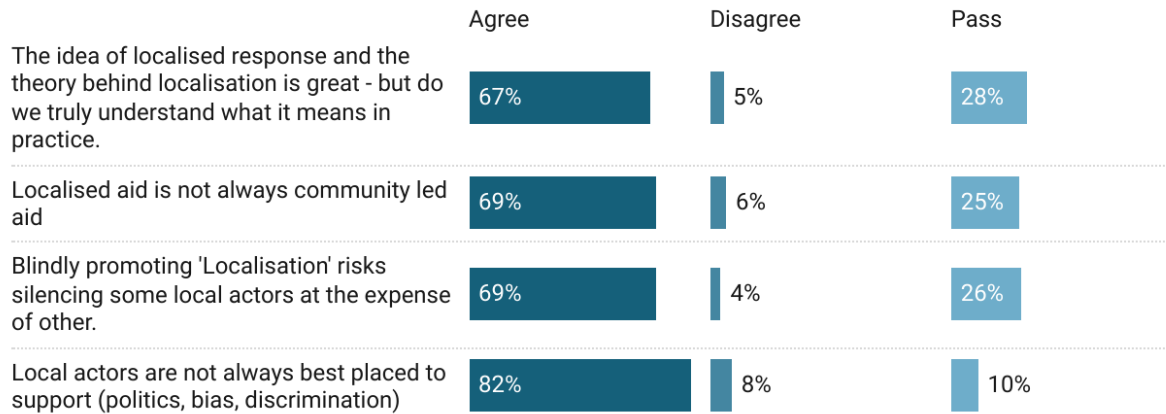
The need for mergers and downsizing was acknowledged, but the reality of the extent to which the system might need to shrink was a source of uncertainty and disagreement.

4. The future of humanitarian action will be more locally led. But it is much less clear what we mean by “localisation” and how we get there.

“Localisation” received more comments than any other theme. Many support a system that is more locally-led, and locally-executed, but doubts, possible risks and trade-offs were also raised. And while most agree broadly on the direction of travel, localisation means different things to different people. Two thirds agreed with the statement: “The idea of localised response and the theory behind localisation is great - but do we truly understand what it means in practice.”

There was broad agreement that local actors are not always best placed; they may be subject to political influence and bias. Local actors are not synonymous with community-led priorities and interests, and there are real risks of promoting favourites. There was also broad acknowledgement that locally-led responses could challenge the application of traditional humanitarian principles, and bring different interpretations of standards.

Participants also questioned whether perceptions of corruption were the reason for low support with just 50% agreeing with the statement that “The perception of widespread corruption is the biggest barrier to direct financial support for local communities and stakeholders” and a further 31% disagreeing.



Created with Datawrapper

In other areas, there was a mix of agreement, and uncertainty, notably from voting bloc B, the “improvers”. There was uncertainty among the Bs around the extent to which funding and support to local and national actors was a problem. While 67% agreed local aid organisations should get much more international funding, just 51% of Bs agreed, with 32% unsure.

5. We are failing in our commitments to “put people first”

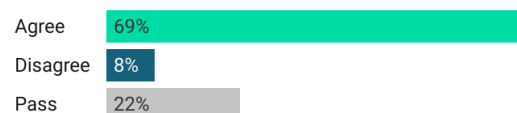
Many agree that the humanitarian system is driven too much by its own institutional motives, and not enough by the preferences of affected people. This permeates fundraising, advocacy and programme design. As a core priority of the Humanitarian Reset, it is important to understand why the humanitarian system has failed to make serious progress on earlier commitments to “put people facing crises first”.

“Every response should begin by asking what the affected community needs rather than bringing a prescribed solution to get buy-in.”



Created with Datawrapper

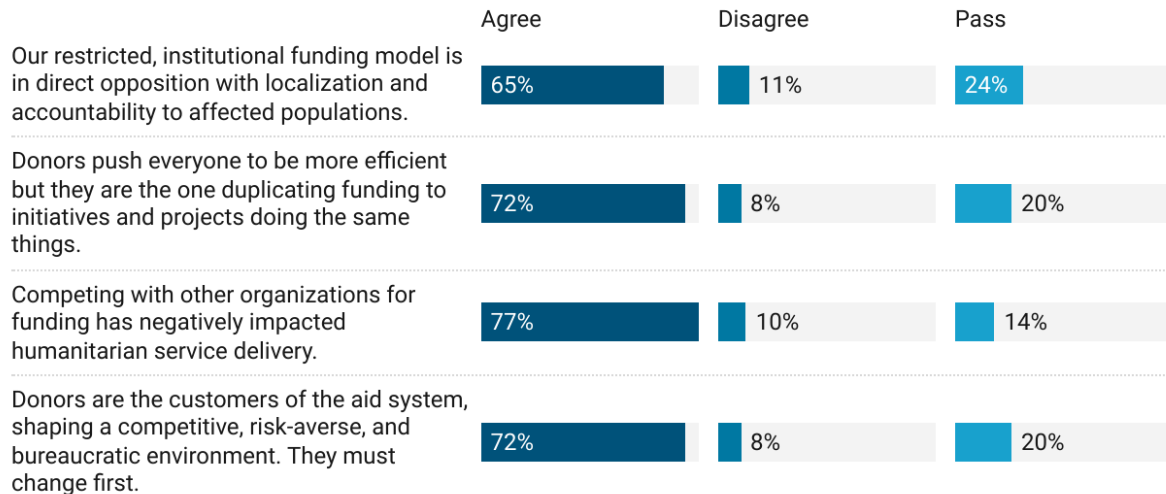
“Advocacy should focus on affected populations not on funding.”



Created with Datawrapper

6. The current funding model is at the heart of many dysfunctions

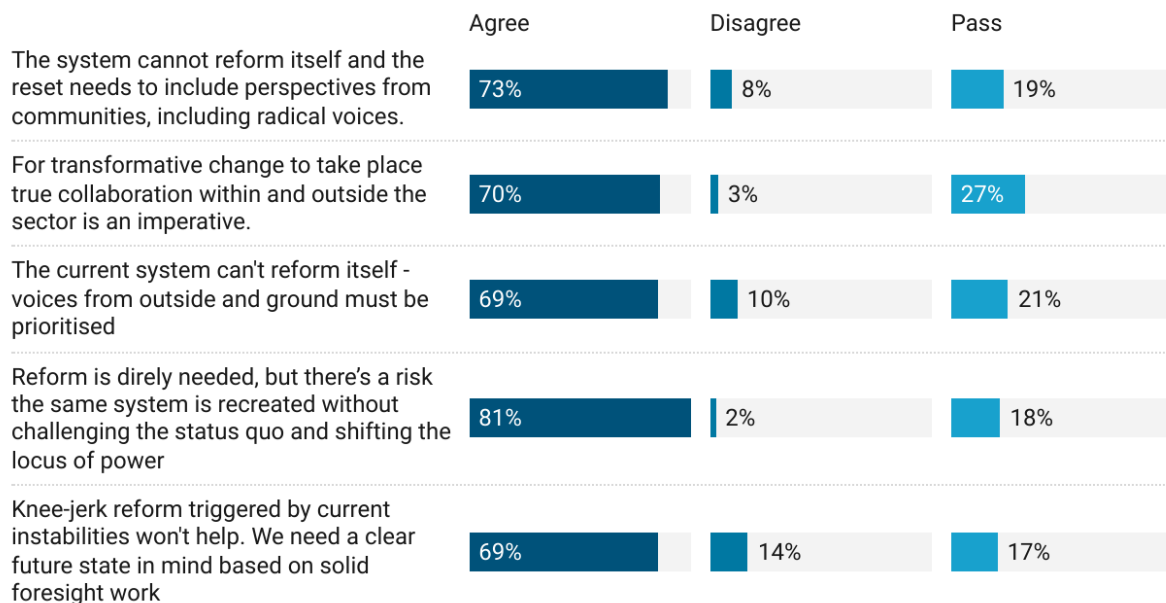
The competitive and restrictive funding model was identified as a key force acting against localisation, downward accountability to crisis-affected people, and effective service provision. Donors were identified as being responsible for negative outcomes including duplication, risk aversion and bureaucratisation.



Created with Datawrapper

7. How reform is carried out matters.

Many agreed with statements arguing that reform cannot happen without challenge from the margins and from outside the system itself. This is in direct contrast to the Humanitarian Reset process. Many also agreed that in the current moment, a clear future-state vision is needed.



Created with Datawrapper